

For Lunch, a Course on JFK

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In the midst of handling an endless series of crises—from Haiti and Somalia to NAFTA and health care—President Clinton took two hours off Monday to try to learn how John F. Kennedy dealt with adversity.

You know the parallels: Young, bright president, inexperienced in foreign policy, sandbagged by poor staffing, staggering from one foreign policy debacle to another: the Bay of Pigs, the disastrous summit with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna.

So the Clintons met with Richard Reeves, author of the acclaimed new biography of Kennedy that has become must reading at the White House. (Clinton hit page 350 on Monday, reading a bit each night before going to bed.)

The brief Oval Office drop-by became lunch with an impromptu invitation from Hillary Rodham Clinton. Reeves, his wife, columnist Catherine O'Neill, and Washington lobbyist Liz Robbins, a mutual friend who arranged the drop-by, ate at a small table on a patio off the president's private office.

Throughout the nearly two-hour lunch, interrupted only once briefly by aide George Stephanopoulos who came around to ask Clinton a question, the group held a wide-ranging discussion, comparing the Washington of the early '60s with Washington today.

One difference, Clinton observed, was that in matters of foreign policy, Kennedy had the benefit of being able to explain crises comparable to Haiti and Somalia within a Cold War context. He was always able to say the country had to act this way or that because the Russians were coming.

Kennedy hated the military, Reeves noted, saying he did not trust them and thought they were, with some exceptions, stupid. Kennedy had, Reeves said in an interview yesterday, "a young lieutenant's view of the brass."

"Clinton rejected this" at the lunch, Reeves said, with Clinton saying that the military is much better educated and much more sophisticated than the fighters of World War II and today's military better understands the political element involved in any equation.

Clinton, by the way, tries to tape his recollections of major actions each evening or at least once a week for historical purposes.

"There were two things on his mind," Reeves said. "Haiti and Bob Dole," who was leading a Senate Republican effort on Monday to restrict Clinton's war-making prerogatives.

Another aspect of Kennedy that intrigued Clinton was JFK's ability to delay his decisions until his team had fully finished all deliberations. "How Kennedy kept situations open so long without making a decision . . ." Reeves recalled.

"The answer, of course, is you stay out of sight, don't be on television every day," Reeves noted. Naturally that was much easier for Kennedy than Clinton, because the press was much less pervasive in the early '60s.

Clinton, lunching on pasta, also said "he felt that reporters were using a technique on him that they did not use in Arkansas or on Kennedy," Reeves recalled. "That they were avoiding getting substantive comment [from senior White House officials] on inside stories in the White House and then the White House explanation or denial would be [dealt with] the next day, so they could have two stories on the subject."

Perhaps the administration should get better at returning telephone calls? Preferably before 8 p.m.?

A 'Repressed Victorian Society' Bites Back

■ On Wednesday, the Clinton administration's AIDS czar told an audience she would help change America's "repressed Victorian society" when it comes to sex. By Thursday, Kristine Gebbie had faxed around a statement emphasizing sexual abstinence and responsibility.

Gebbie told a conference on teenage pregnancy Wednesday that just talking about sex "in terms of don'ts and diseases" is not working and that the United States needs to view sexuality as "an essentially important and pleasurable thing."

Until it does so, "we will continue to be a repressed, Victorian society that misrepresents information, denies sexuality early, denies homosexual sexuality particularly in teens, and leaves people abandoned with no place to go," Gebbie was quoted by wire services as saying.

"I can help just a little bit in my job, standing on the White House lawn talking about sex with no lightning bolts falling on my head," she concluded.

It may not have been lightning that hit her, but something did.

On Thursday, the White House put out a sober Gebbie statement that spoke of sexual abstinence as the "surest" way to prevent HIV and "how adolescents must enter adult life with a better base of information."

It's Official . . .

■ Vice President Gore's communications director, Marla Romash, who departed the VP's shop this week, will assume the job of spokeswoman for the health care reform effort until Congress adjourns in a month or so, replacing Kevin Anderson, who resigned. The White House says she then will go on to a political consulting firm, which is widely reported to be Grunwald, Eskew & Donilon.

There also is talk at the White House that Philip Lader, Renaissance Weekend founder and Office of Management and Budget deputy director for management, might add oversight of the White House personnel shop to his responsibilities.